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Conflict and cohesion on Amundsen's South Pole journey

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Abstract

Roald Amundsen's South Pole party is routinely depicted as an unusually harmonious and high-performing team. This article re-examines that assumption by returning to the only contemporary sources that intermittently record interpersonal strain during the Pole march: the diaries of Sverre Hassel and Olav Bjaaland. Using a deliberately narrow empirical base and a transparent inclusion procedure, the study restricts all claims about friction to what the diarists explicitly note. A minimal coding vocabulary—task, process/authority, and relationship/tone—serves as an organising device rather than an explanatory framework. Seventeen diary passages document irritation, disagreement, reprimand, sarcasm, or social sanction linked to identifiable expedition members. Read conservatively, the diaries neither support a counter-myth of dysfunction nor permit inferences about the prevalence or long-term significance of conflict. They do, however, make one conclusion difficult to avoid: the Pole march cannot responsibly be described as frictionless simply because it succeeded logistically or was later narrated smoothly. Instead, the diary evidence shows that operational excellence coexisted with domain-specific frictions—over judgement, rations, navigation, role allocation, and tent-life tone—and that authority and contradiction repeatedly appear as interactional fault lines. Cohesion, where it existed, was not the absence of strain but a condition under which strain could still be written down.

Introduction

Roald Amundsen's South Pole expedition (1910–1912) is widely recognised for its logistical effectiveness, yet far less attention has been devoted to analysing the interpersonal dynamics within the five-man polar party during the Pole march itself. Existing biographical and popular narratives foreground planning, execution, and competence, often treating cohesion as an assumed background condition rather than an empirical subject of investigation (Bomann-Larsen, 2006; Bown, 2012; Huntford, 1999). More broadly, scholarship has shown that Amundsen's historical image has been repeatedly reshaped in response to changing cultural and historiographical concerns, particularly in relation to leadership, heroism, and national memory (Aas, 2022). The present article does not attempt a general reinterpretation of those larger issues; instead, it addresses a narrower empirical question by returning to the contemporaneous diaries of the Pole march itself. Scholarship in polar cultural history has also demonstrated how Heroic-Age expedition accounts were shaped by performance, narrative polishing, and reputational concerns that tended to suppress discordant elements, including everyday frictions that did not fit established heroic frames (Bravo & Sörlin, 2002; Launius, 2010; Lewis-Jones, 2017). What this body of work provides, however, is primarily interpretive commentary or retrospective synthesis; it does not offer a systematic, comparative examination of contemporaneous diary material from the Pole march as a way to document interactional strain.

Within the broader expedition, historians have already identified tensions—for example, Lantz's (2025) analysis of leadership conflict during the “false start”—yet these studies largely address organisational and leadership dynamics at Framheim rather than the day-to-day working relations during the South Pole journey. This article relates to the broader Norwegian polar historiography collected in *Norsk polarhistorie* (Drivenes & Jølle, 2004), especially where that literature has complicated the heroic image of Amundsen without examining the Pole march itself as an interactional micro-context. A review of the main historiographical, biographical, and published-diary literature indicates that while interpersonal issues are sometimes noted, no study applies an explicit, source-critical procedure to the Pole-march diaries with the aim of identifying and classifying friction episodes. This article, therefore, positions its contribution narrowly: it examines the diary evidence not because other sources are uninformative in general, but because the March diaries offer the only sustained, day-by-day textual record of the party during the journey.

This study focuses on two contemporaneous diaries—those of Sverre Hassel and Olav Bjaaland (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011)—because they provide continuous chronological coverage of the Pole march and because, among the available diaries, they most consistently include remarks relevant to work coordination, decision-making, and intra-party interactions.

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Other materials, such as Amundsen's and Wisting's diaries (Amundsen, 2010; Wisting, 2011) and Helmer Hanssen's later account (Hanssen, 1941), were examined but found to contain very few explicit, situationally detailed comments on interpersonal strain in the specific context of the Pole march. These sources are not dismissed as irrelevant; rather, their limited utility for the present analytical purpose lies in the scarcity and generality of their interpersonal remarks.

Diaries, however, are selective documents. Their emphases reflect individual temperament, genre conventions, and the practical constraints of writing under extreme conditions. The evidence base is therefore necessarily asymmetrical: Hassel offers considerably more interpersonal detail than Bjaaland, whose diary is predominantly logistical and observational. Bjaaland's relative silence cannot be interpreted as evidence of harmony, just as Hassel's more explicit criticisms cannot be taken as a complete representation of the party's social landscape. Accordingly, the study is limited to descriptions of moments of friction explicitly recorded in the diaries and does not infer broader patterns of cohesion, personality, or leadership beyond what the texts support. To organise the diary material without imposing retrospective psychological explanations, the analysis draws on a limited vocabulary from research on teams operating in isolated, confined, and extreme (ICE) environments (Golden, Chang, & Kozlowski, 2018; Landon et al., 2019; Marcinkowski, Bell, & Roma, 2021). These concepts are used solely as classificatory tools—to differentiate task-related tensions, authority-linked disputes, or frictions arising under environmental strain—rather than as interpretive frameworks for inferring motives or diagnosing personalities. This restricted use of ICE research serves only to enhance consistency and avoid impressionistic interpretation.

The research question guiding the study is therefore: What forms of interpersonal friction are explicitly recorded in the contemporaneous diaries of Sverre Hassel and Olav Bjaaland during the southbound and northbound journeys of the South Pole march, and what do these episodes suggest—within the limitations of an asymmetrical and selective source base—about leadership, cohesion, and small-group functioning within Amundsen's polar party?

The article proceeds by first situating the study in the relevant historiography and explaining the constrained use of ICE-team research. It then outlines translation and analytic procedures, presents findings directly supported by diary evidence, and interprets these findings in relation to leadership practices and narrative representation while avoiding conclusions that exceed what the sources can support.

Historiographical and theoretical background

This section situates the article's contribution within three necessary domains: (1) the historiography of polar exploration and of Amundsen's South Pole expedition specifically; (2) approaches to diaries as historical sources; and (3) a minimal analytical vocabulary for classifying friction episodes without importing retrospective psychological explanation. The goal is not to impose a theoretical superstructure upon the diaries, but to create a disciplined evidentiary context for the empirical analysis that follows.

From heroic-age narrative conventions to professional historiography

Polar exploration has long been embedded in narrative traditions emphasising national prestige, exemplary leadership, and heroic

endurance. Historical surveys repeatedly note that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century polar exploration writing often circulated more as public memory and national myth than as professional historiography (Bravo & Sörlin, 2002; Launius, 2010). These conventions produce recognisable narrative effects: coherence, competence, and unity appear as naturalised features of expeditionary life, while ambiguity, contradiction, or friction may be rendered narratively inconvenient.

Recent scholarship has shown how these traditions continue to shape the afterlives of polar expeditions. The historiography of the Heroic Age is not static; its central figures—Scott, Shackleton, and Amundsen—have been repeatedly reframed as cultural values, institutional contexts, and media forms have changed (Barczewski, 2023). The point for the present article is not that heroic narratives are “wrong,” but that they represent one genre of representation among many, and that they do not themselves establish the interpersonal dynamics of daily life on a 1911–1912 sledging journey.

A persistent feature of the major narrative and biographical accounts of Amundsen's South Pole expedition is the assumption—often implicit rather than defended—that the polar party operated as a uniformly cohesive and harmonious unit throughout the march. Works such as Huntford's *The Last Place on Earth* (1999), Bomann-Larsen's *Roald Amundsen* (2006), and Bown's *The Last Viking* (2012) all emphasise logistical mastery, strategic foresight, and disciplined execution, but they do so by presenting the five-man party as a self-evidently integrated team whose internal relations require little or no examination. In these accounts, the absence of interpersonal detail functions rhetorically as evidence of cohesion: harmony is not demonstrated, but presumed—either because friction is considered narratively irrelevant or because logistical success is taken to guarantee social unity.

This narrative pattern aligns with broader Heroic-Age representational conventions, in which coherence, competence, and orderly teamwork were foregrounded for both national and reputational reasons. As a result, tension, disagreement, or irritation—unless dramatically consequential—rarely appear in these standard accounts, not because the evidence disproves them but because these micro-interactional dimensions were not treated as analytically meaningful. This historiographical environment is the backdrop against which the present study positions itself. By returning to contemporaneous diaries, the analysis interrogates precisely the interpersonal micro-context that these conventional narratives leave unexamined.

Amundsen historiography and the unexamined Pole-march micro-context

Within the Amundsen literature, specifically, cohesion during the Pole march has rarely been treated as an explicit analytical object. Major biographies—Huntford's sharply contrasting dual study of Scott and Amundsen (1999), Bown's narrative biography (2012), and Bomann-Larsen's detailed account (2006)—emphasize planning, logistics, leadership image, and strategic execution but provide almost no systematic analysis of day-to-day interactional behaviour during the southbound and northbound journeys. More recent Norwegian scholarship has nevertheless complicated the heroic image of Amundsen. Kvam (2000), in particular, presents him as a highly capable but authoritarian leader, marked by strong demands for loyalty and limited tolerance for contradiction. Related perspectives appear in Aas (2022), Berg (2004), Eriksen (2004), Fulsås (2004), and Næss (2004), which together situate

Amundsen within broader debates about leadership, national memory, and changing historiographical representation. These works overwhelmingly treat the five-man polar party as a competent, largely harmonious unit whose efficacy requires little further examination; what they do not provide, however, is a systematic, source-critical reading of the contemporaneous Pole-march diaries as evidence for the expedition's interactional micro-context.

Published diary editions and related cultural-historical studies do not close this gap. Huntford's *Race for the South Pole* (2010), for example, makes key expedition diaries available but offers little sustained analysis of small-scale interpersonal strain, while cultural-historical work on polar representation remains focused on mediation, spectacle, and hero-construction rather than day-to-day interaction within the marching party (Huntford, 2010; Lewis-Jones, 2017). The issue is therefore not a lack of source material in general but the absence of a systematic, diary-led analysis of the Pole march as an interactional micro-context. By concentrating on the only contemporaneous diaries that intermittently record such moments, the present study addresses that specific historiographical gap.

By contrast, the diary material examined in this article records a set of concrete interpersonal moments—sharp disagreements, reprimands, irritation, sarcasm, and communicative withdrawal—that do not appear in the dominant narrative sources. The present study, therefore, uses these diaries not to overturn existing accounts wholesale, but to test how far the Pole march's internal social history can be reconstructed when micro-interactional evidence is treated as analytically meaningful.

Diaries as egodocuments: evidentiary potential and interpretive constraints

The methodological status of diaries requires explicit treatment. Following scholarship on egodocuments (for example, Mascuch, Dekker, & Baggerman, 2016), diaries are understood not as transparent records but as first-person sources in which the writing subject continuously selects, frames, and omits material. Under sledging conditions, this selectivity is sharpened by fatigue, cold, instrument duties, and ration constraints.

Three principles follow. First, diaries capture what the diarist chose to record under extreme conditions, not a complete map of group life. Second, the absence of comment cannot be read as evidence of harmony, and the presence of irritation does not represent an exhaustive picture of interpersonal relations. Third, empirical claims in this article rely solely on explicit diary statements—disagreements, reprimands, refusals, criticisms, and tensions—not on inferred motives or personality traits. This approach treats the diaries neither romantically nor sceptically, but as deliberately partial records that nonetheless contain identifiable friction events.

A minimal and bounded analytical vocabulary for identifying friction

To avoid impressionistic interpretation, the analysis employs a limited coding scheme grounded in well-established distinctions from conflict research. Jehn's (1995) differentiation between task conflict (disagreements about work content, decisions, or resource allocation), relationship conflict (interpersonal incompatibility, irritation, and antagonism), and process conflict (disputes about roles or procedures) provides a functional structure for classifying diary-recorded episodes. This typology does not impose modern

organisational psychology onto a 1911–1912 expedition; it merely ensures that like cases are compared with like in a transparent manner.

Studies of teams in ICE environments further indicate that conflicts in such contexts typically arise in domain-specific forms—work disagreements, interpersonal tensions, and authority-related disputes—rather than as undifferentiated “dysfunction” (Golden et al., 2018; Marcinkowski et al., 2021). This insight is used here only to reinforce the methodological point that conflict episodes can be categorised by their immediate functional domain without inferring deeper psychological dynamics.

Scope limitation. These frameworks are not employed to explain expedition behaviour or to evaluate leadership quality. They serve solely as classificatory aids to answer the narrow empirical question: What kinds of friction were explicitly recorded, and how can these episodes be grouped for systematic analysis? No interpretive claims depend on modern behavioural theory.

Later representations and the status of “narrative smoothing”

Work in Antarctic humanities has shown that diaries can play complex roles in shaping and reshaping expeditionary reputations (Leane, 2016). Diarists often write with uncertain future readerships in mind—including superiors, editors, and national audiences—which may influence tone, frankness, and the recording of complaints.

However, this article does not analyse later published accounts, nor does it claim that narrative smoothing occurred in any specific text. “Narrative smoothing” is used here solely as a historiographical reminder: retrospective expedition narratives often omit minor frictions even when they appear in contemporaneous diaries. Its sole relevance is to support the methodological choice of treating the diaries as the primary evidentiary base for documenting friction episodes. No causal claims are made about why later accounts emphasise unity or omit discord.

Together, these historiographical, methodological, and theoretical considerations justify the approach set out in Section Sources and methods: to construct a transparent, source-critical classification of interpersonal friction during the Pole march, grounded strictly in contemporaneous diary text and informed—but not explained—by minimal typological distinctions.

Alternative diary-based approaches and the rationale for a minimally interpretive coding scheme

Several established diary-based methodologies could be applied to this material. Genre-analytic approaches, for example, highlight how heroic-age expedition diaries reflect literary conventions, expected masculine performance, and institutional reputations (Bravo & Sörlin, 2002; Lewis-Jones, 2017). In this view, passages describing irritation or reprimand may be seen as rhetorical acts shaped by expectations of leadership or discipline, while scholarship on egodocumentary “silences” suggests omissions might represent deliberate self-presentation rather than mere recording choices (Mascuch et al., 2016).

While these methods offer valuable insight, they involve interpretive moves—such as genre reconstruction or inferred audience orientation—that go beyond the diarists' explicit words. In contrast, this study uses a deliberately bounded, diary-led coding scheme for three main reasons. First, the empirical aim is modest: to document the forms of interpersonal friction explicitly recorded in contemporaneous diaries during the Pole march, using

minimal coding vocabulary (task, process/authority, and relationship/tone) to organise the material without assuming additional diaristic intentions. Second, alternative interpretive models risk bias by reading passages as broader representational patterns rather than as specific descriptions; this study restricts itself to explicit interactional elements without attributing rhetorical purpose. Third, a strictly text-bound method ensures transparency, with every claim directly traceable to explicit diary phrasing.

This approach does not dismiss alternative models but clarifies that its analytical goal is different. While genre, performance, and silence-based approaches are suitable for studying how diaries construct expeditionary identities, the present study focuses only on classifying and describing recorded friction episodes, using a conservative evidentiary method.

Sources and methods

This study draws exclusively on the contemporaneous diaries of Sverre Hassel and Olav Bjaaland, the only surviving daily records from the five-man polar party that contain sustained commentary on interpersonal interaction (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011). Because no authoritative English translations exist, all translations are my own, with attention to preserving tone and evaluative nuance.

The linguistic character of the diaries also shaped translation decisions. Bjaaland wrote in a form closely aligned with Nynorsk rooted in the Telemark dialect, whereas Hassel wrote in Bokmål associated with Kristiania. These differences affect lexical choice and idiom and were handled conservatively to retain the diarists' narrative voice in passages involving irritation, tone, or evaluative phrasing.

The diarists also occupied different positions within the Polar Party, a point that matters for interpreting both wording and selectivity. Olav Bjaaland was recruited above all as an expert skier and was also crucial in improving skis and sledges before the march; this helps explain why his diary often attends to movement, terrain, equipment, and practical travel conditions. Sverre Hassel, by contrast, entered the expedition with substantial prior polar experience and was selected in part as an expert dog driver, which may help explain his attention to coordination, procedure, and points at which decisions affected the party's working order. These role differences do not determine what each man wrote, but they likely shaped what each found salient enough to note, as well as the language through which events were framed.

Although the diaries document the same journey, they differ substantially in detail and narrative threshold: Hassel frequently records interactional sequences and explicit evaluations, while Bjaaland writes more concisely and with greater logistical focus. These differences shape the evidentiary granularity available for reconstructing interpersonal events.

The remaining primary materials—Amundsen's and Wisting's diaries—contain very few situationally detailed comments on interpersonal strain, and Helmer Hanssen's diary has been lost. Their relative silence is treated as a limitation of the available record rather than as evidence of harmony or discord. Consequently, the empirical analysis draws only on the diary passages that preserve explicit interpersonal content.

To identify friction episodes consistently, I included passages in which interpersonal strain is explicitly articulated in relation to at least one identifiable party member. Qualifying material includes: (i) described disagreements, reprimands, refusals, sarcastic remarks, or communicative withdrawal; (ii) competing proposals

or judgements in shared decision contexts; and (iii) evaluative remarks about another member's conduct when framed as socially consequential. Environmental or logistical difficulties were excluded unless explicitly linked to interpersonal tension. When actor identification was unclear, passages were retained but marked accordingly.

Extracted episodes were coded using a minimal, domain-sensitive framework distinguishing task-related disagreements, process/authority-linked interactions, and relationship/tone-based tensions. These categories serve solely to organise diary material and are not used as explanatory models. Ambiguity in tone or phrasing—especially where Norwegian wording allows multiple gradations—was preserved through conservative translation choices consistent with the diary-led approach.

Findings

All diary citations are given as diarist, publication year, and entry date (e.g., Hassel, 2011, 19 November 1911). The findings below are derived only from the contemporaneous diaries of Sverre Hassel and Olav Bjaaland (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011). All episodes reported here meet the inclusion criteria specified in Section Sources and methods. The coding produced 17 friction episodes in total: 11 in Hassel and 6 in Bjaaland (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011). Episodes are presented thematically rather than chronologically; no coded episodes are omitted. The primary coding distribution is process/authority ($n = 6$), task ($n = 6$), and relationship/tone ($n = 5$). Where an episode plausibly touches more than one domain, it is still assigned a primary code, consistent with the method's emphasis on transparent, minimal classification rather than explanatory overreach (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011).

Table 1 summarises the distribution of the 17 friction episodes identified in the two diaries. It is intended as an orientation device rather than a quantitative measure of conflict frequency, since the entries reflect only what Hassel and Bjaaland chose to record explicitly.

Process/authority friction

The six process/authority episodes concentrate on moments when disagreement intersected with role hierarchy—that is, when alternative views, procedural deviations, or interpersonal responses were recorded as consequential in an authority-structured setting (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011).

- (1) Major confrontation and threatened removal (Hassel): 19 November 1911.

The most explicit process/authority episode in the diary material is Hassel's account of "a heated (and rather loud) argument" between Amundsen and Bjaaland "regarding the odometer and other matters." Hassel records that the disagreement escalated to a formal instruction: Amundsen "ordered Bjaaland to turn back" after accompanying the party through the ascent, and Hassel (as navigator) was ordered to accompany him; Hassel further records that Bjaaland "quickly relented" and asked Amundsen to reconsider, which he did while stating that he "would not tolerate contradiction" (Hassel, 2011, 19 November 1911).

Bjaaland's entry for the same day corroborates the broader operational context of equipment damage and collisions in the sled train, reporting that "the front of my sled broke" and "the back of Hassel's sled was also damaged" during a dramatic descent in

Table 1. Distribution of coded friction episodes in Hassel's and Bjaaland's diaries

Primary code	Number of episodes	Main source pattern	Typical content
Task	6	Hassel and Bjaaland	Disagreements or criticism concerning calculations, rations, navigation, route choice, or depot location.
Process/Authority	6	Mainly Hassel, with one Bjaaland episode	Disputes over command, contradiction, role allocation, reprimand, or decision procedure.
Relationship/Tone	5	Mainly Hassel	Irritation, sarcastic tone, perceived favouritism, tent-life annoyance, or communicative withdrawal.
Total	17	11 Hassel; 6 Bjaaland	Explicitly recorded friction episodes only.

Note: Primary code indicates the dominant dimension of each episode. Several episodes touch more than one domain, but each was assigned one primary code to preserve transparency and avoid double-counting. The table summarises only explicitly recorded friction episodes; silence in either diary is not treated as evidence of harmony.

which dogs and sleds “crashed into each other” (Bjaaland, 2011, 19 November 1911). The argument itself is recorded only by Hassel; the shared evidentiary core is the logged sequence of collision/equipment disruption and Hassel's reported escalation to an order and its retraction (Bjaaland, 2011, 19 November 1911; Hassel, 2011, 19 November 1911).

- (2) Crampons dispute framed as intolerance of alternative views (Hassel): 1 December 1911.

Hassel records a disagreement about ice crampons and writes that his suggestion (“it was unlikely we would need them”) “as usual, irritated” Amundsen, adding the contemporaneous characterisation that Amundsen “does not tolerate differing opinions” (Hassel, 2011, 1 December 1911). This is treated as process/authority friction because it centres on the acceptability of dissent within the decision procedure, as recorded by the diarist (Hassel, 2011, 1 December 1911).

- (3) Goggles dispute explicitly labelled “sharp disagreement” (Bjaaland): 11 January 1912.

Bjaaland records: “The captain is impatient, tolerates no contradiction, sharp disagreement over goggles,” and then explicitly marks uncertainty by asking whether the captain is annoyed because he refuses to wear “those damned Roald-style snow goggles” (Bjaaland, 2011, 11 January 1912). The disagreement and the “tolerates no contradiction” characterisation are treated as evidence of friction; the causal question is retained as Bjaaland's speculation and not converted into a stronger explanatory claim (Bjaaland, 2011, 11 January 1912).

- (4) Depot crisis: proposal, silence, and reversal (Hassel): 3 January 1912.

In the depot-search episode, Hassel records Amundsen proposing abandonment of the depot and heading toward the Butcher's Shop; when Amundsen asks if anyone has a better suggestion, Hassel reports that “everyone remained silent,” except Hanssen who “as usual” readily agreed, followed by Amundsen's later reversal once the location of the depot became visible (Hassel, 2011, 3 January 1912). This episode is coded as process/authority because the diary foregrounds decision procedure (solicitation of alternatives; silence; assent) rather than direct interpersonal confrontation (Hassel, 2011, 3 January 1912).

- (5) Trailbreaking/role allocation dispute with tone marker “sarcastically” (Hassel): 7 January 1912.

Hassel records an interaction over who should make tracks: Hanssen drives forward; Amundsen questions why no one is in front; Hanssen justifies; Amundsen asserts tracks are preferable and orders Hassel to go ahead, adding that he would do it himself “he said sarcastically” if Hassel could not manage (Hassel, 2011, 7 January 1912). The diary provides explicit speech acts (question, justification, and order) and a tone marker; the analysis restricts itself to that record (Hassel, 2011, 7 January 1912).

- (6) Communication withdrawal (“refusing to speak”) after disagreement (Hassel): 18 January 1912.

Hassel records that Hanssen “has fallen out of favor” after expressing a differing view about whether a dog carcass (“Else”) smelt bad and writes: “Amundsen is now refusing to speak to him!” (Hassel, 2011, 18 January 1912). The evidentiary claim is the recorded communication withdrawal; any broader interpretation remains explicitly Hassel's framing (“fallen out of favor”) rather than an asserted causal mechanism (Hassel, 2011, 18 January 1912).

These process/authority episodes are predominantly recorded in Hassel (4/6), which reflects the diarists' different thresholds and styles of recording interpersonal events. Bjaaland provides fewer but pointed instances—most notably the goggles dispute (11 January 1912)—while Hassel provides longer sequences with more explicit description of interactional structure and tone (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011).

Task disagreements

The task-coded episodes are concentrated around route/depot judgment, ration adequacy, and operational proposals. They document disagreement over what should be done, not primarily over interpersonal compatibility—although some task episodes include sharp phrasing (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011).

- (1) Suggested pace increase rejected (Bjaaland): 12 November 1911.

Bjaaland records: “Suggested traveling 25 miles per day, but the response was that it wouldn't be wise for the dogs” (Bjaaland, 2011, 12 November 1911). The responding actor (presumably Amundsen) is not named; consistent with the method, the episode is retained as a task disagreement with actor-uncertainty (Bjaaland, 2011, 12 November 1911).

- (2) Pemmican increase proposed “for the second time” and refused (Hassel): 10 December 1911.

Hassel records: “Tomorrow, I will propose for the second time that we increase the pemmican rations . . . However, this does not meet with

Amundsen's approval" (Hassel, 2011, 10 December 1911). The diary documents proposal and refusal rather than an argument, which is analytically important: the record supports "internal negotiation over ration adequacy" but does not warrant claims about escalation beyond what is written (Hassel, 2011, 10 December 1911).

- (3) Depot judgement disagreement (Bjaaland): 2 January 1912.

Bjaaland records that others believed they were east of the depot, while he believed "just as firmly" that they were slightly west (Bjaaland, 2011, 2 January 1912). The entry is treated as a task disagreement in judgement, with no reconstruction of dialogue (Bjaaland, 2011, 2 January 1912).

- (4) Depot disagreement resolved: "my theory" (Bjaaland): 3 January 1912.

The next day Bjaaland records: "After much deliberation, the conclusion was that we had drifted westward—my theory" (Bjaaland, 2011, 3 January 1912). The finding extracted is limited: the diary records deliberation, a conclusion, and Bjaaland's note that the conclusion aligned with his prior view (Bjaaland, 2011, 3 January 1912).

- (5) "Bet a million" denial followed by concession (Bjaaland): 7 January 1912.

Bjaaland records a sharp disagreement over recognising a passage while descending the Axel Heiberg Glacier: "There is the passage," followed by Amundsen's "No way! I'll bet a million that it's not," and then "You're right" shortly afterwards (Bjaaland, 2011, 7 January 1912). This is treated primarily as task disagreement (route recognition), while the "bet a million" phrasing is treated as a diary-recorded feature of how the disagreement was expressed in that moment (Bjaaland, 2011, 7 January 1912).

- (6) Dog-food miscalculation and generalised critique (Hassel): 5 November 1911.

Hassel records that Amundsen "miscalculated" dog-food use, leading to reduced dog rations at the depot, and then generalises: "Time and again, Amundsen's calculations prove unreliable. Theory is one thing, practice another" (Hassel, 2011, 5 November 1911). This is treated as task-domain friction expressed as explicit evaluation of another member's planning competence; it is not presented as a recorded argument unless the diary states it as such (Hassel, 2011, 5 November 1911).

The 12 November (pace proposal) and 5 November (miscalculation critique) episodes are less dramatic than the 19 November confrontation, but they matter for the core claim that friction appears repeatedly in routine operational domains (pace planning; ration calculations) rather than only in exceptional crisis events (Bjaaland, 2011, 12 November 1911; Hassel, 2011, 5 November 1911).

Relationship/tone friction

The relationship-coded episodes record interpersonal irritation, complaints, and negative appraisals of tone or character. Here the asymmetry between diarists is especially important: Hassel provides most of the explicit evaluative language, which must be treated as Hassel's perspective rather than "the group view" (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011).

- (1) Peer irritation: "annoyed that I drive too slowly" (Bjaaland): 11 December 1911.

Bjaaland records: "Hanssen is annoyed that I drive too slowly" (Bjaaland, 2011, 11 December 1911). This is a direct statement of interpersonal irritation with identifiable individuals and no reported escalation (Bjaaland, 2011, 11 December 1911).

- (2) Breakfast question → "wrath" → grievance persistence (Hassel): 5 December 1911.

Hassel records that Amundsen asked whether Hassel and Bjaaland had eaten breakfast; Hassel replied that they had eaten "a few biscuits," which "provoked . . . wrath," and Hassel adds that the issue was raised again later that evening in the tent (Hassel, 2011, 5 December 1911). The finding is limited to the diary's record of affect ("wrath") and persistence ("brought up . . . again"), without inferring motive (Hassel, 2011, 5 December 1911).

- (3) Snoring complaint and Hassel's evaluation of communicative style (Hassel): 12 January 1912.

Hassel records Amundsen's complaint that Hassel and Bjaaland's snoring disturbed him and then offers his own evaluative commentary: "there are different ways to say things," "the most unpleasant and arrogant way," and "an unpleasant character to share a tent with" (Hassel, 2011, 12 January 1912). The evidentiary claim extracted is that Hassel experienced tent-life interactions as strained and attributed that strain to communicative style; the stronger character judgement is treated as Hassel's phrasing, not as an objective diagnostic (Hassel, 2011, 12 January 1912).

- (4) Food practice as perceived preference/fairness issue (Hassel): 26 December 1911.

Hassel describes Amundsen's "cup of soup" habit and records that Hanssen—described by Hassel as Amundsen's "favorite"—ensured he did not lose "his fair share" (Hassel, 2011, 26 December 1911). This is not presented as a logged confrontation; it is treated as a relationship-salient episode because the diary explicitly frames the practice in terms of preference and fairness (Hassel, 2011, 26 December 1911).

- (5) Explicit appraisal of Amundsen's "inaccurate" estimates (Hassel): 15 November 1911.

Hassel writes: "Amundsen's estimates regarding distance and conditions here are proving quite inaccurate" (Hassel, 2011, 15 November 1911). This is included as relationship/tone friction because it is an explicit negative appraisal directed at another member's judgement. Importantly, it is treated as Hassel's evaluation, not as a verified measurement of error beyond the diary text (Hassel, 2011, 15 November 1911).

Bjaaland contributes only one relationship-coded irritation episode (11 December), and it is notably terse compared to Hassel's explicit tent-life evaluations. That contrast supports the methodological point from Section Sources and methods: diary silence or brevity cannot be read straightforwardly as harmony; it may reflect a different recording threshold and style (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011).

Synthesis

The complete set of 17 coded episodes documents that interpersonal friction was recurrently recorded during the Pole march

across multiple domains, rather than confined to a single crisis or to one interpersonal dyad. The diary record shows (i) repeated process/authority tensions around contradiction, decision rights, and communicative control (e.g., 19 November; 1 December; 11 January; 18 January), (ii) task disagreements in navigation and resource governance under uncertainty (e.g., 12 November; 2–3 January; 7 January; 10 December; 5 November), and (iii) relationship/tone episodes emerging in the confined tent environment and in evaluative attributions (e.g., 5 December; 12 January; 26 December; 15 November). These findings answer the empirical component of the research question posed in Section Introduction: the diaries do contain explicit, classifiable friction episodes during both the southbound and northbound phases of the march (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011). Any broader interpretation about what these episodes imply for leadership, cohesion, or narrative representation is reserved for the Discussion and is not asserted here beyond what the diary entries explicitly record (Bjaaland, 2011; Hassel, 2011).

Discussion

Re-situating the “harmony” assumption

Accounts of Amundsen’s South Pole expedition have often treated the party’s logistical success as if it also settled the question of its internal social life. In both biographical and leadership-oriented literature, Amundsen frequently appears as the exemplary case of disciplined preparation, technical competence, and group effectiveness under extreme conditions (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Parry & Bryman, 2006; Seeger, 2003). Within such framings, success itself tends to function as indirect evidence of cohesion: a team that reached the Pole first and returned safely is implicitly assumed to have worked together smoothly. Heroic-age polar narrative conventions reinforce this tendency by foregrounding coherence, competence, and purposeful action while leaving everyday frictions analytically marginal (Bravo & Sörlin, 2002; Lewis-Jones, 2017).

The present study does not dispute the expedition’s operational success, nor does it propose a counter-narrative of dysfunction. Its contribution is narrower but historiographically important: when the contemporaneous Pole-march diaries are read comparatively and source-critically, the inherited equation between success and social smoothness becomes difficult to sustain. The diary record shows that disagreement, irritation, reprimand, and sanction were not absent from the march’s daily life, even within a group that functioned at an exceptionally high level. This point matters because it re-positions cohesion as something more demanding than the absence of friction. The diaries suggest that the party’s effectiveness coexisted with, and may in part have depended on, interactional practices through which disagreement was contained, redirected, or rendered consequential.

Seen in this light, the article’s argument is less about “discovering conflict” than about correcting an interpretive shortcut in the existing literature. As recent Norwegian historiography has already shown, Amundsen’s image has long been shaped by changing representational needs, including idealisations of leadership and heroism (Aas, 2022; Eriksen, 2004). The diary evidence does not overturn those broader interpretations, but it does require a more cautious linkage between outward success and presumed internal harmony. The central point, then, is not that the expedition was conflict-ridden, but that friction and high performance were not mutually exclusive. The South Pole march can no longer be responsibly described as frictionless simply because it succeeded.

Authority, contradiction, and the management of dissent

The most striking pattern in the diary material is not simply that disagreement occurred, but that contradiction repeatedly appears as an interactional boundary problem. When alternative views are voiced—over equipment, route recognition, or procedural judgement—they are often recorded not as neutral contributions to collective deliberation but as socially consequential interventions within a strongly hierarchical setting. In this respect, the diary record lends limited but suggestive support to a strand of Norwegian scholarship that has portrayed Amundsen as an exceptionally capable yet strongly authoritarian expedition leader. Kvam (2000), in particular, emphasises his high demands for loyalty and low tolerance for contradiction, while Berg (2004) similarly situates him within a command culture in which authority was effective but potentially brittle when challenged. The present study cannot confirm such broader characterisations in any comprehensive sense, but it does show that contemporaneous diarists sometimes registered contradiction itself as a fault line in the party’s internal life.

This matters because much of the leadership-oriented literature that invokes polar exploration—and Amundsen in particular—has tended to treat a successful outcome as evidence of effective leadership in a largely affirmative sense. Both Hogan et al. (1994) and Seeger (2003) use Amundsen’s expedition to illustrate the relationship between preparation, team effectiveness, and successful leadership under extreme conditions. That framing is not wrong, but the diaries make it more textured. They suggest that such effectiveness was not necessarily accompanied by broad deliberative openness or emotionally neutral interaction. Instead, authority appears to have been maintained through a relatively narrow tolerance for contradiction, supported by reprimand, rhetorical closure, and, at times, communicative withdrawal.

The analytical point, then, is not that Amundsen’s leadership was “authoritarian” in a modern diagnostic sense, nor that the party’s internal relations can be reduced to conflict over command. Rather, the diaries indicate that the management of dissent formed part of the party’s ordinary working order. Input could be offered, but not all contradiction carried the same legitimacy, and some forms of disagreement appear to have triggered explicit boundary enforcement. In this sense, authority during the Pole march was not merely a formal given; it was repeatedly reproduced in interaction. The expedition’s internal social history therefore looks less like a frictionless chain of coordinated action than like a high-performing hierarchy in which contradiction had to be actively managed.

Friction and functioning

Taken together, the diary material suggests that friction during the Pole march was neither random nor globally destabilising. It was concentrated in specific domains—navigation, rationing, pace, role allocation, and tent-life tone—and appears as situationally triggered rather than as evidence of general group breakdown. This matters because it shifts the analytical question from whether the party was “harmonious” to how a high-performing small group could continue to function despite intermittent irritation, disagreement, and sanction. The diaries do not support an image of emotional smoothness, but neither do they support a counter-myth of dysfunction. What they reveal instead is a pattern of friction that was domain-specific, unevenly recorded, and compatible with continued operational effectiveness.

This coexistence of friction and functioning is important both empirically and historiographically. Heroic-age narratives have often implied that cohesion should be inferred from success, as if logistical achievement necessarily presupposed social unity (Bravo & Sörlin, 2002; Lewis-Jones, 2017). The diary record complicates that inference. The party continued to march, make decisions, and solve problems even when members disagreed over route recognition, criticized judgements, or registered irritation with one another's conduct. In this sense, cohesion—if the term is to be retained at all—cannot be defined here as the absence of strain. It is better understood as a working condition under which strain could occur without halting collective progress.

The point is not that conflict was beneficial in any simple sense, nor that all forms of friction were equally consequential. Some disagreements remained within the task domain; others became entangled with authority or tone. But the diaries do suggest that high-performing expeditionary groups should not be imagined as socially frictionless simply because they succeeded. This aligns with broader observations from conflict research and work on teams in ICE environments, where low-level friction is often managed, bracketed, or absorbed rather than fully resolved (Golden et al., 2018; Jehn, 1995; Marcinkowski et al., 2021). The present study does not use that literature as an explanatory framework, but the comparison is useful in one limited sense: it helps clarify that repeated disagreement under pressure is not incompatible with coordination, nor is irritation necessarily equivalent to breakdown.

Seen in this light, the Pole march appears less as a seamlessly integrated enterprise than as a high-performing hierarchy in which work continued across episodes of dissent, annoyance, and correction. That does not diminish the expedition's operational achievement. It does, however, make one narrower historiographical conclusion unavoidable: logistical success cannot serve as a proxy for interpersonal smoothness. The diaries show that functioning and friction coexisted and that this coexistence forms part of the expedition's recoverable internal social history.

Diaristic asymmetry and evidentiary limits

Any discussion of conflict and cohesion on the Pole march must remain constrained by the asymmetrical and selective nature of the surviving diary record. Hassel and Bjaaland did not write at the same narrative threshold, with the same descriptive habits, or from the same role position within the party. Hassel records longer interactional sequences and more explicit evaluations; Bjaaland is generally terser, more logistical, and less inclined to elaborate interpersonal moments. That asymmetry is not a problem to be solved but a condition of the evidence itself. As scholarship on egodocuments has stressed, diaries are structured by selection, fatigue, genre convention, and individual habits of notation rather than by any obligation to document group life comprehensively (Mascuch et al., 2016). What survives, therefore, is not a balanced map of relations but two differently filtered records of what each diarist found salient enough to write down.

This has two immediate consequences for interpretation. First, cross-diarist convergence matters more than numerical distribution. When otherwise dissimilar diaristic voices independently register sharp disagreement, irritation, or constrained tolerance for contradiction, this strengthens the case that such moments formed part of the party's interactional reality. Second, absence cannot be treated as evidence of harmony. The fact that one diarist records little or no strain in a given episode does not show that none occurred; it shows only that it was not noted. For

the same reason, stretches of silence after a recorded confrontation cannot be used to infer reconciliation, emotional repair, or restored cohesion. The documents rarely support such claims, and to read them into the record would be to replace source criticism with narrative desire.

This asymmetry also helps define the limits of the article's contribution. The present study does not claim to reconstruct the full emotional climate of the party, still less to infer stable character traits or leadership psychology from selective remarks written under extreme conditions. Its claims remain deliberately narrower: the contemporaneous diaries preserve a limited but significant set of explicitly recorded friction episodes, and these episodes are sufficient to challenge the inherited assumption that logistical success can stand in for interpersonal smoothness. Beyond that, the evidentiary ground quickly narrows. The most responsible conclusion is therefore also the most modest one: the Pole march's internal social history is only partially recoverable, and it must be described within the uneven topology of what the diaries actually record.

Historiographical contribution

The contribution of this article is deliberately limited, but that limit is also its historiographical value. It does not seek to overturn the broader literature on Amundsen nor to replace one totalising image—heroic harmony—with another image of latent dysfunction. Rather, it offers a narrower correction to a persistent assumption in both expeditionary narrative and later interpretation: that logistical success can stand in for internal social smoothness. When the contemporaneous Pole-march diaries are read comparatively and source-critically, that equation becomes difficult to sustain. The expedition remains what it has long been understood to be—an extraordinary operational success—but the internal social history recoverable from the diaries is more uneven, more contingent, and more friction-bearing than standard accounts have usually allowed.

In that sense, the article aligns with recent scholarship that has complicated the heroic image of Amundsen without reducing it to simple reversal. Norwegian historiography has already shown that his later reputation was shaped by changing needs of leadership, national memory, and hero construction (Aas, 2022; Berg, 2004; Eriksen, 2004; Fulsås, 2004; Kvam, 2000; Næss, 2004). The present study does not extend those arguments into a general reinterpretation of Amundsen's leadership or public image. Its intervention is more specific: it demonstrates that the Pole march itself, often treated as the purest expression of disciplined unity, also contained explicitly recorded moments of disagreement, irritation, reprimand, and constrained tolerance for contradiction. That finding does not rewrite the expedition; it refines the terms in which its internal dynamics can be discussed.

More broadly, the article also makes a methodological point relevant beyond this case. Heroic-age expeditions have often been narrated through retrospective coherence, whereas contemporaneous diaries preserve a more uneven record shaped by selectivity, asymmetry, and variable thresholds of notation. Read conservatively, such sources rarely yield a complete social map. What they can do, however, is unsettle interpretive shortcuts. In this case, the shortcut is the inherited move from success to presumed harmony. The diary record does not justify that move. It instead supports a more demanding conclusion: that high-performing expeditionary groups may be historically recoverable not as frictionless entities, but as working hierarchies in which strain and functioning could coexist.

Conclusion

This study has examined the interpersonal dynamics of Amundsen's five-man South Pole party by limiting its empirical base to the only contemporaneous texts that provide continuous coverage of the Pole march and that, at least intermittently, record interactional strain: the diaries of Sverre Hassel and Olav Bjaaland. Read conservatively, these diaries show that disagreement, irritation, reprimand, and authority-linked tension were explicitly recorded at specific points during the journey. They do not support a counter-narrative of dysfunction, but they do make it difficult to describe the march as frictionless simply because it succeeded logistically.

The evidentiary limits of the material remain central. Hassel's diary is much more explicit and evaluative than Bjaaland's, and this asymmetry means that the distribution of recorded friction cannot be treated as a proportional map of group life. Silence cannot be read as evidence of harmony, just as explicit criticism cannot be extrapolated into a complete picture of the party's internal relations. The contribution of the article is therefore necessarily narrow: it identifies and classifies only those moments of strain that the diarists themselves chose to record. Within that limit, however, the historiographical implication is clear. The Pole march emerges not as a uniformly harmonious enterprise inferred from success but as a high-performing and tightly interdependent small group in which friction and functioning coexisted. This does not diminish the expedition's operational achievement. It does, however, refine its internal social history by challenging the inherited assumption that logistical success can stand in for interpersonal smoothness.

Two focused research directions follow from these constraints. First, systematic comparison with other heroic-age sledging diaries—conducted with equivalent inclusion criteria and coding procedures—could clarify whether similar types of recorded friction appear across expeditions and writing practices, and how diaristic thresholds shape what becomes part of the interpersonal archive. Second, an examination of how contemporaneous diaries were later excerpted, omitted, or reframed in published narratives would illuminate how the Pole march's social history was subsequently smoothed, compressed, or transformed.

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